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ABSTRACT

Prepared by the national professional association of education reporters, this publication contains five articles that emphasize stories about mothers' crucial roles in their children's literacy. Reporters in five different parts of the United States sought out and interviewed young mothers with school-age children. "An Overview: Mothers' Voices" (Anne C. Lewis), is followed by "Rural Kentucky: Dreams Derailed by Poverty" (Jamie Lucke), which concerns white mothers raising children on their own in a rural Appalachian county in Kentucky. "Charleston, S.C.: Trying To Break the Chain" (Herb Frazier) concerns a black mother in a South Carolina urban area. "Baltimore, Md.: Aching To Do Better" (Gelareh Asayesh) relates stories about two- and three-generation, single-parent, black families in an inner-city area in Baltimore, Maryland. The efforts of newly arrived Hispanic families in Dallas, Texas to achieve literacy are described "Dallas, Texas: De Nada a Literacy--In One Generation" (David Fritze). Finally, "Portland, Ore.: To Speak or Not To Speak--The Home Language" (Miko Yim) addresses efforts of Hmong and Vietnamese families in Portland, Oregon to learn English. Summary comments about the stories are offered in the introduction to the report, which notes that family circumstances often outweigh educational concerns in the families described. The mothers see survival as a more central issue than schooling. Although many of the mothers have almost overcome the limitations of their backgrounds, they do not seem to be able to change or escape from their environment. The schools do not cope well with children who are different from other children, and parents are often intimidated by the schools. In spite of these difficulties with schooling, literacy behaviors in the homes are reinforced even by parents who do not know English. Contains eight references. (LB)

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LISTENING TO MOTHERS' VOICES

A Reporter's Guide to Family Literacy

EWA

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About the Reporters

Gelareh Asayesh is a freelance writer based in Silver Spring, Md. Until recently, she covered education for the Baltimore Sun. In her three years at the Sun, she also covered suburban Washington and wrote a four-part series on Iran. She covered education and various suburban beats for the Miami Herald and has won awards for investigative reporting and feature writing. She was born and raised in Tehran, Iran, and earned her bachelor's degree in journalism and history from the University of North Carolina at Chapel Hill.

Herb Frazier has been a journalist for 20 years. He covers South Carolina's public and private colleges for The Post and Courier newspaper in Charleston. He has held editing and reporting positions at The State newspaper in Columbia, S.C., the Dallas Times Herald, The Charlotte Observer and The Times-Picayune in New Orleans. He has won several state and regional awards, including the South Carolina Press Association's Journalist of the Year Award in 1990.

David Fritze is a former general assignment reporter for the Dallas Times Herald, which folded in December. He recently went to work as a general assignment writer for The Arizona Republic in Phoenix. He has written extensively on issues relating to Hispanics and immigrants, education and children. He is a former editor and writer for the Oklahoma Monthly magazine, and spent a year in Ecuador on a Rotary Foundation fellowship.

Jamie Lucke has covered education for the Lexington Herald-Leader for four years. She had the same beat at the Birmingham Post-Herald. She has worked as a reporter in Clarksonville, Fla. and Valdosta, Ga., as well as a number of Kentucky towns.

Miko Yim is a freelance reporter based in Portland, Ore. Her work has appeared in Time magazine, East West News, and The Portland Oregonian. She has worked as a reporter and writer in radio, television and print and co-authored and edited a college level sociology text.

Anne Lewis is an education policy writer in the Washington, D.C. area. She began her 30-year, award-winning career in education writing as a reporter for the Corpus Christi (Texas) *Caller-Times*. She served as an editor of *Education USA* for 10 years and has been the Washington columnist for the *Phi Delta Kappan* for the last nine years. She works as a consulting editor with the Education Writers Association, both for the EWA Media Resource Center on Literacy and for *High Strides*.

An Overview: Mothers' Voices

by Anne C. Lewis

The hand that rocks the cradle also tells the family stories, reads the books, asks "What did you do at school today?"

The mother's voice is crucial. In fact, the education level of the mother is the strongest variable affecting student achievement, according to accumulating research on family literacy. It is more important than family income or father's employment and/or education.

Intergenerational literacy has become an important issue for policymakers. Some experts, such as researcher Thomas Sticht, contend that funds for compensatory education for children would be better spent if they directly focused on improving the literacy of mothers, instead. Head Start is now requiring an adult literacy component in each of its programs. The relatively new federal Even Start program gives as much attention to parent education as to school readiness for young children.

In the states, welfare policies and parent literacy programs are intertwined because welfare recipients, most of whom are mothers of young children, must enroll in education classes if their literacy skills are below those of an eighth-grade level. States are developing some unique programs under this mandate. Wisconsin requires young mothers to attend school if they wish to receive their full welfare benefits (the latest data from Learnfare, however, indicates that it has not improved the attendance rate of the mothers). In Ohio, a more successful program provides bonuses to custodial parents under age 19 who return to and stay in school.

However, severely tight state budgets and public discontent have created more restrictive policies in some states in recent months. Similarly, swelling welfare rolls are receiving national political attention. That will likely intensify; unmarried births are up sharply in the past five years. For example, more than one-half of all births to women ages 18 and 19 were out of wedlock. On the basis of what is known about previous single-female families, society will be dealing with higher percentages of under-educated mothers. Once they begin families, unwed mothers' formal education tends to end.

Not all families with low literacy levels are on welfare, but mothers who are poor, non-English speaking, and/or raising children by themselves are more likely to live on the margins.

Except for newly arrived immigrant mothers, all of the female heads of young families have attended public schools. One-half of welfare recipients nationwide, for example, have high school diplomas.

The relationship of these low-income mothers to the education system was the part of intergenerational literacy chosen by the Education Writers Association for this reporting project. In 1990–1991 EWA asked reporters to look at two other aspects of adult literacy—the early implementation of the education/training portions of the Family Support Act and the accessibility of literacy improvement systems to adults wanting or needing to increase their skills. The report, *Is the Story Literacy, Decent Jobs, or Political Will?*, found a mixed picture of good results when funding and quality programs were available, failure when they were not.

It also seemed appropriate to ask why so many women were either on welfare or trying to make it in the job market with inadequate skills when they had been through the public school system, at least partially. How far did they go in school? What role do they give formal education in their lives? Are there patterns of poor performance and relationships with schools that are being repeated in the next generation? Are there aspects of cultural literacy which are different from "school literacies?"

Five reporters in different parts of the country sought out young mothers with school-age children to interview. Some were referred by community workers; some mothers were in literacy programs or shelters. None were "picked" for the reporters by school personnel, although in one community, schools identified the pool of children the reporter interviewed before identifying the mothers to talk to. Because some are in programs or have had contact with community groups, they may have more sophisticated literacy skills and higher motivation than women who face their problems alone. This report includes:

- Two- or three-generation single-parent Black families in inner-city Baltimore
- White mothers raising children on their own in a rural Appalachian county of Kentucky
- Black mother in Charleston, S.C.
- Hispanic newly arrived families in Dallas, Texas

- Hmong and Vietnamese families in Portland, Oregon.

While a number of observations about the lives the mothers lead could be made from the following articles, these summary comments focus on those which most influence the development of literacy. The suggested findings apply generally, with some exceptions for the Hispanic and Asian families.

- The pull of the family circumstances—often those of low education, violence, inadequate support services such as quality day care, and a history of early pregnancies—is almost too strong to overcome, particularly because the pull from the other side, the schools and their goals, is too weak. When they talk about their lives, these women do not put school as a central influence. Survival—and protection of their young—are the issues for them. Public policies may underestimate the efforts needed to modify generations of low expectations, inadequate support services, and peripheral attitudes about schooling.
- Despite family patterns of turmoil and low expectations of them, these mothers *almost* overcame their backgrounds. Many are still trying. All of them want a better life for their children and themselves and have done what they could to make it happen. However, the environment around them has not changed, and few of the children in these families seem destined to move very far from that environment.
- Schools generally provided no window of better opportunity for these mothers. A few were experiencing success at some level before they dropped out, but expectations of them were low. Only one reported being in an honors course. Some felt the sting of poverty in the way they were treated at school. None recall receiving encouragement from counselors. They did not draw firm connections between what they did in school and life chances until much later, if at all. Once out of the education system and burdened with family responsibilities, it was very difficult, if not impossible, to continue with their education.
- The schools do not cope well with children who are "different," or they misinterpret them. Differences stemming from poverty apparently cause educators to have low expectations of students. Further, the strengths of cultural differences and cultural literacies are all but lost in the school environment. School-site educators, focused on their tasks regarding traditional school literacies, often do not appreciate the circumstances of children from poor and/or culturally different families. For example, there may be no one at home with the English skills to help with homework, or families do not have telephones in order to call homework hotlines. While central office personnel may understand the importance of family literacy, local school people do not seem to connect opportunities for higher literacy in the family to higher achievement by their students. In fact, local school staff were suspicious of the motivation of parents. One teacher in Dallas told a reporter she was not sure whether the parents "don't know how to read English or don't want to;" a principal in Baltimore told the parents they should not come to school "just to drink the coffee. . .and eat the Danish. . . ." The growing research base and understanding about how to teach the non-English speaking (e.g., improve literacy in the family language first or concurrently) was evident only in Portland.
- Parents often feel intimidated by the schools, stemming from their own poor experiences. The modes of parent contacts have not changed since they were in school. No one reported being visited at home by teachers, even though central office administrators and community activists indicated this strategy would help teachers as much as children.
- The patterns of low-self esteem and downward spiral of accomplishment seem to be continuing in these families. Young children start out well; older children, especially Black males, are struggling even though they have strong personal support from their mothers. Many mothers do not like decisions being made about their children, but only those with the time and bravado to be very involved in the schools become part of that decisionmaking process.
- Even with all of these problems, the literacy behaviors in the homes seemed reinforced, even from those who did not know English. These varied, but included enforcing a study period before the children go out to play, telling stories when the parent did not know how to read, reinforcing the importance of reading and school, involving other children or other adults in helping the children when they could not help themselves, reading to the children as best they could.
- Except for Asian children, the children in these stories rarely are exposed to wider cultural/literacy influences by their families. The public library is the most common "extra" experienced by them. Few reading materials are present in the homes, although TV is a major literacy tool. However, the mothers are trying—from those studying for a GED, to Hmong mothers' insistence on keeping the oral traditions going, to a mother writing a personal journal in her third-floor sanctuary away from the turmoil downstairs. In none of these efforts, however, are they receiving help for themselves from the schools.

Rural Kentucky: Dreams Derailed by Poverty

by Jamie Lucke, *Lexington Herald-Leader*

"Daddy whips you."

A little boy is speaking to his mother. His words are part taunt, part straightforward observation. They bring all her good intentions crashing down around their faded pink trailer along a dirt road in Eastern Kentucky.

The woman, who became a mother and school dropout at 16, tries to do right by her children. She reads to them and tells them stories. *Rumpelstiltskin* is one of their favorites. On the couch in their tiny kitchen-living room, there is a spiral bound notebook in which she has neatly drawn a colorful clown.

She visits their school and dreams of getting a GED for herself. Like women across the Kentucky mountains, she is determined her children will have a better life than she had.

But she is struggling against powerful odds in a culture that batters its women and children if not always literally, in almost every other sense.

This is a region short on medical care, jobs, decent housing and public transportation. The 27 counties that made up southeastern Kentucky's Fifth Congressional District led the nation in the percentage of adults without a high school degree in the 1980s.

Double-digit unemployment is common, and people are leaving the region in droves in search of work. Out-migration cost Appalachian Kentucky one of its two Congressional seats last year. As people continue to flee in search of jobs, those left behind will be even needier.

Against this backdrop of hardship, the efforts of a lone woman such as Mary Allen, living in Floyd County, Ky., with her three children in the lonely pink trailer, seem to shrink.

It is the same story again and again.

When the women of Appalachian Kentucky talk about the forces that derailed their own educations, the common threads are poverty, violence, alcoholic parents, pregnancy, early marriage, apathetic educators.

Talking to these women underscores some of the problems faced by schools and parents. How can children learn to read and do math until their more urgent needs are met? Needs such as physical and emotional security, self-esteem, even wearable clothes.

Sexism is another common thread when these women talk about the forces that shaped their lives, though they do not use that particular word. They are more likely speak as does Mary Allen. Of her estranged husband, she says, smiling, "He wanted to keep me in the house . . . barefoot and pregnant."

"I've been down a hard road," the 25-year-old woman says, in a stunning bit of understatement. Her story is a textbook study in why young girls become pregnant just to bring some affection and attention into their harsh lives. "I don't think it works out that way," she is quick to say. "At that age, you're taking on more than you can handle, but once you're into it you have to handle it."

She was one of 12 children of an alcoholic mother. She has lost count of the foster homes in which she spent her childhood, perhaps three or four. "I just didn't like school. It's probably different if you have parents at home encouraging you. . . . If I'd had a mother with me, I'd have stayed in school."

She became involved with her husband-to-be when she was 13 or 14. By the time she was 16, she was married, a mother and a high school dropout. She has given birth four times; one baby died.

"I can read good and stuff like that, and I'm pretty good in arithmetics. I never got into algebra. I'd like to get into a GED class," Allen says. Her husband and the lack of child care kept her from enrolling. "He wouldn't give me that room to breathe . . . It's like he didn't want me to go out of the house, even to see my family."

Now he is gone and the youngest child is in kindergarten. But she is still not enrolled. "If I can get my GED, nothing's going to stop me. I'm going to go straight through. Because I want to show my kids school is important . . . ."

Her life and early marriage "ain't been bad," she says. "It could have been a lot better. . . . I wouldn't change it. I love my kids. I haven't always done the best for my kids, but I've been there for them and I do love them. I'd have been tickled to death to have had that."

As she struggles to raise her family, Allen relies almost entirely on maternal love to guide her. Obviously, her own experience provides few positive models. She is not in any programs that teach parenting skills. At the time of the interview, she lacked transportation; her estranged husband had borrowed her car. Her children were clean and attractive.

They played with a small fleet of toy trucks and a grimy baby doll in a toy carriage, but no books were visible in the living room.

Looking back on their own schooling, many Appalachian women fondly remember a single teacher. This is usually someone who took a special interest in them and seemed to care. On the whole, however, they recall school as a place where they might as well have been invisible. Many women in their 20s and 30s have vivid memories of coming to school hungry and in shabby clothes that shamed them. They say teachers and principals were more than willing to write off the raggedy, poor children.

"I felt like . . . they were putting more of an effort into the richer kids," Allen says. Her children attend her old elementary school. She thinks the school is doing a much better job now. The teachers and principal are easy to talk to and seem to care, she says. The school is brighter and more cheerful than when she was there. The playground has new equipment.

Grit over Grime

Barbara Moore, 36, brings a different, more critical, perspective of her daughters' schools, also in Floyd County, Ky. The death of her husband five years ago pushed her daughters from the middle class onto the free lunch rolls. She detects a difference in the attitude of teachers and the principal toward her and her children. She suspects other single mothers and their children suffer similarly. "The children are just not given the respect that my older child experienced," she says. "I was a single-parented child, too, and they treated me different." Home was a "hole in the holler in Knott County." She dropped out of school at age 17 after she became pregnant and got married. Her mother, who had never been encouraging, condemned her: "Emotionally, it left a scar on me."

She knew nothing about birth control. "Are you kidding? I didn't hardly know at the time what was getting me pregnant."

She earned a GED in 1979 even though her "mother and husband just fought me all the way." Interviewed at Prestonsburg Community College where she is a student, she also is living proof that families are not doomed to repeat the past.

Her daughters regularly make the academic honor roll. She has insisted on an open, honest relationship with them. "I told them from age five, you have to be close and tell me everything." As soon as the oldest became sexually active, she arranged for her to get birth control pills: "I told her about mom's mistakes. She doesn't want to face what mom faced." The daughter is a pre-med student at the University of Louisville, working her way through college.

Moore credits television talk shows ("television was my thing," she says) with teaching her to build up her children's self confidence and to read to them. "I had such bad self esteem when I was growing up. People didn't care much for me so why should I care for me? . . . I failed most of whatever I took in school," she recalls. She wanted her children "to be more than I was," so she helped them at home. "I read to them and then they read to me. . . . I'm glad I don't have to read to these children anymore. It was a chore," she says with a laugh. "Anyone says they enjoy reading to their children haven't got them grown up."

Moore and a number of other women express contradictory feelings toward their own schools. They recognize circumstances beyond the school's control rendered them ill-prepared to learn as children. At the same time, they say that even a little attention would have let them blossom.

"I don't think there was much the school could have done," Moore says. "Probably to take more interest in the underprivileged children. We knew we were underprivileged. Children like myself didn't have the best of clothing or enough food. We were on free lunch. When you go to school like that, your self esteem goes down. There is a difference, and the teachers and the principals think, 'These children are not going to make it anyway. So let's give the other ones the time because they can make it.' And that's pitiful."

She fears her children will suffer some of the same indignities, despite her efforts at home. "Last year my middle child in the eighth grade got a whipping. It was the first time the child had ever been in trouble . . . . It had a devastating effect on her. She has never had a good feeling toward school since then. I don't think she'll ever get over it." Moore, who says she recently tested at the 12th grade level in reading, plans to apply for nursing school in Prestonsburg. If she is not admitted, "I probably will end up moving to Louisville (200 miles to the west) to finish my education because I've come too far to quit."

Becky Lawson, 29, of Jackson County, Ky., struggles to break out of the patterns of her past. She grew up dirt poor, one of eight children. Her father brutally beat her mother.

"Mommy said: 'Go to school and get an education so you can get out of here.' I couldn't concentrate. I was thinking, 'Is my mother getting her head bashed through a wall?' When you can hear his voice or hear him ramming her head through the wall, you can't go to school and learn."

Lawson's mother was 13 and her father 16 when they married. Like many Appalachians, they left the hills and moved to the lush, affluent Bluegrass country

around Lexington. Her father got a job on a horse farm. He was bringing home $93 a week in 1976 to feed, clothe and house the remaining six children.

Lawson went to school in Lexington, where she dropped out of one of the state's best high schools. "I never failed a year, and I never did any work," she says. "To me, you existed, that's all you done. It didn't matter to them (teachers) whether I got an education or not. It didn't make a bit of difference to them, and it didn't make a bit of difference to me either," she says.

"I could have did real good if they'd paid attention. If they'd of come up one time and been real nice and said, 'There's a reason you're not doing your work, and I'd like to know what it is,' " she believes.

But except for her high school biology teacher, no one showed any interest. The one time she talked to a counselor about her suicidal impulses, her mother was called and told everything she had said.

Learning to Not Quit

Lawson dropped out and went to work in a carwash. Two marriages and two children later, she is living in the hills her parents left and working toward her GED. Why? Because her 10-year-old daughter announced one day she planned to quit school. "If I've quit, how can I tell her she can't," asks Lawson.

She believes, "I'm good at everything but this math. All I had was basic math." She studies in an adult education class at her child's elementary school. She took a break from her math work to talk about her life. She knows her childhood experiences have affected the way she deals with her children: "I catch myself screaming at my kids. It's hard to keep from doing the same things to them that I went through. It's easier to reach over and smack them than say, 'You're not to do that; go to your room.' "

She credits her second husband with helping her work on controlling her temper. If he were not there to stop her, she says she probably would hit them. "I've always heard you do what's done to you," she says. Lawson is determined not to let that happen in her family. And she is just as passionate about her neighbors' children. In Jackson County, 70 percent of the children qualify for free lunches. More than one-half of them never graduate from high school. Plenty of kids need help, Lawson says, even those who "live in brick houses and have medical cards." There are children who "wear the same clothes everyday, and most of the time that's the same underclothes," she says. They may be "malnourished, or if not malnourished, hungry, and their teeth are hurting."

Lawson is sure that "if that kid don't have somebody that cares a little bit . . . that kid is not going to sit down and learn." But there are not many to support the children. Almost four out of ten women who gave birth in Floyd County in 1989 had less than a high school education. The percentage was even higher in Jackson County, where almost one-half of the new mothers had less than a high school education. There are counties in the region with even higher percentages of mothers who are dropouts. Their children's prospects are bleak indeed, given the near perfect correlation between a mother's education and a child's educational attainment. Like Lawson, many Appalachian women say one of the most powerful incentives to pursue their GED is to provide their children with a better role model.

There also is an economic incentive. "You can't even get a department store job without your GED or diploma," says Sharon Thacker, who is studying to take the high school equivalency exam. "I finally caught on to algebra," she says. "Those numbers and letters scared me to death for a while." She says she "loved school, I wouldn't mind being in school today," Sharon says. "It seems like nothing was the same anymore (after she dropped out.) Things like that change you."

Nonetheless, two of her three daughters dropped out of high school. "I said, 'I wish you'd go on. Look at Mom because Mom's stuck.' " But her pleas fell on unreceptive ears. "They're going to do what they're going to do. No matter what Mom says, they'll say, 'Mom, you didn't finish.' The oldest one says 'Mom, I'm proud to be in your shoes.' " Thacker was interviewed in Floyd County at the shelter for battered women where she is living.

The word "intimidation" often comes up when under-educated women talk about dealing with their children's schools. This intimidation works both ways.

Phyllis Sparks, 34, the mother of a fifth-grader at rural Sand Gap Elementary School in Jackson County, Ky., always had unpleasant experiences when she talked with teachers about her bright but difficult son. "You were just a nobody and they were all of it," she says. "When I came through that (school) door I didn't want to talk; I wanted to get physical. If they whipped him, I wanted to give them the same."

Her attitude reversed after she became involved in the school's family resources center, established as part of Kentucky's ambitious education reform package in 1990. The centers are supposed to help families find help not normally available through schools and to link schools and families. Now, Sparks participates with teachers in discipline decisions about her son. As a volunteer in the school, she has developed a greater appreciation for teachers: "Before I thought they just sat behind a desk and drawed a check."

New Mothers, Old Patterns

Even today, girls in Eastern Kentucky leave school before their 16th birthdays to have babies. Kentucky law requires all students to stay in school at least until they are 16, and the legislature is expected to raise the mandatory attendance age to 18. But the law makes an exception for mothers under 16.

In Floyd County, the rate of births among 15-to-19-year old women is higher than the national rate (68 live births per 1,000 women in this age group versus 53.6 per 1,000 nationally.) And some Eastern Kentucky counties have much higher teenage birth rates than Floyd County. But child care is provided at only one of the county's five public high schools.

"A number of kids fall through, and they're forgotten about," says Marty Green, a counselor at the David School, a privately funded alternative school for dropouts. "That's what makes our kids unique. They don't allow themselves to be forgotten about." The David School, with 72 students in the eighth through 12th grades, occupies a drafty coal camp commissary heated (sometimes) by a temperamental furnace. The school is raising money for a new building and hopes to expand to 100 students. But the ratio of students to teachers will remain 10-to-1 or less. Green describes the David students as resilient and survivors. But he says they are often branded as no-account failures outside school. Life offers these youngsters few breaks.

But for someone like Jennie Adkins, a student at the David School, the odds seem even longer. She is 17, battling a host of emotional demons and trying to be a decent mother to a sickly four-month-old daughter.

Jennie is overweight. She speaks softly and slowly. Her young face wears an expression of permanent sadness. She was expelled from her high school in part for fighting with another girl. After the fight at a fast food restaurant, some tables had to be replaced, she says.

She and her daughter live with her mother and stepfather and two little boys. One of the boys belongs to her sister, who left school in the eighth grade and had her first child when she was 14. The

Carla's Day

Carla Allen rises at 5:30 a.m.

She readies three children (ages 6, 7 and 9) to catch the school bus at 6:30. Then she dresses her four-year-old. The children's unemployed father, who is not living with the family, usually picks up the youngest and cares for him during the day. She drives 40 miles to Prestonsburg Community College, hoping her old car makes it over the mountain roads.

She studies when she is not in class.

By 4 p.m., she is home and it is time to cook supper. She goes to the Laundromat every other night. Between loads, she helps the children with their homework. She gets the children into bed by 8 or 9. At midnight, she sleeps.

Does she have time to read to them? "It don't seem like I do," she sighs. "Maybe on weekends. . . ."

"We read Dr. Seuss books 'til they wore out." Sometimes the little girl clamors for attention and wants to be held while Carla is busy in the kitchen. So she lets her stand on a chair "so she can see" her cook.

The children play school. The nine-year-old is the teacher.

"The two oldest (boys) spit and cuss. I caught them smoking. I can't do nothing with them," Allen says. One had problems in school: "He was messing on himself." A teacher for homebound children came to the house for a while to teach him.

Allen goes to their school "constantly to argue with the principals and teachers. I was talked down to like I was stupid, didn't have no sense. . . . Some teachers are like that," she says. "There are a lot of teachers who [aren't] that way."

Now, 26, she dropped out of high school when she became pregnant. She wears her long red hair pulled back. Her green eyes glow, and her freckled face is scrubbed clean. Her battered hands tell of hard work. Her nails are chewed to the quick.

A tutor from the Christian Appalachian Project, a volunteer agency, came to her house and helped her get ready for the GED. She first came into contact with the private agency when she needed help paying a bill. "It's kind of like, if they're going to help you, you ought to do something to help yourself." It took her two months to get the GED. Now she's a student at the community college. "I'm going to try to get a degree in social work."

sister is 20 now and has been married three times. Her mother adopted the other child.

Jennie and her daughter, Bonnie Leona Lynn Adkins, share a bedroom. "I'm up and down all night" with the baby, she says. Her mother takes care of the infant when Jennie is at school. Jennie recently missed a week of classes while the baby was in the hospital with a kidney infection. "I stayed there day and night."

For Jennie, home is "everybody arguing . . . It gets my nerves stirred up . . . Lord, I feel like I could kill someone. . . . "The last time I got mad, I took razor blades and sliced my wrists." After the suicide attempt, a psychiatrist at the local mental health agency prescribed a number of drugs "to keep my nerves down." She has been pregnant twice; the first pregnancy when she was 16 ended in a miscarriage. After delivering her daughter a year later, Jennie received the Norplant contraceptive implant. Jennie's mother, 43, also is a dropout. She left school when she became pregnant.

After Bonnie was born, "Mom said, 'Well, you have to quit school and take care of your baby.' I said, 'No, find me a baby sitter or something.' Ever since I was little, I wanted to be a nurse."

Jennie says her advice to other girls her age would be: "Finish school before you get pregnant, and if you do get pregnant, finish school and try to make something of yourself." Asked what she would do for young girls if she controlled the government's purse strings, she says: "I'd give them Norplants until they turned [old] enough to have kids. "As for young mothers, "I'd try to find them a home and give them more money to help them out." Jennie and her baby receive $168 a month in welfare and $98 in food stamps. "You can't move out of the house on that."

While Jennie's advice reflects a certain wisdom, she clearly is a troubled child. "When I get mad, I go to the bedroom and sit and hold on to my teddy bear," she says. "Everyone says, 'boy oh boy, what a mommy—holding on to baby dolls.' I've collected baby dolls all my life. I even have a glass baby doll that was grandma's." Jennie said she took her grandmother's baby doll to a pawn shop once and found out it was worth $350. She says she would never sell it; she wants her daughter to have it. It is an honorable and natural instinct for a mother: to pass along something meaningful to her child. But in the hills of Appalachia, a young mother must struggle to pass along even something as fragile as a glass doll.

(*Herald-Leader* librarian Robin Luger contributed to this article.)

Tips for Reporters

Finding people with low literacy levels is easy in Appalachian Kentucky. The state usually leads the nation in most measures of under-educated adults. It is considerably harder to find people willing to talk about their educational experiences or ask you into their homes. Without observing families at home over a long period of time, I think it will be difficult to gauge how much time is spent with children on reading and other school related activities.

Apart from that, I was impressed by how open, articulate and thoughtful these women were. I started at an elementary school in a very poor, rural county. I chose this school because I wanted to do a story about its family resources center. The center runs a "family reading" class and other activities to involve parents in the school. I talked to about a dozen women in group settings over the course of a day. I sat down and did an in-depth interview with one woman in a GED class.

Moving deeper into the coal fields, I called the coordinator of a program for adult women, so-called "non-traditional" students, at Prestonsburg Community College, a two-year-school that also offers pre-college courses and adult education.

She introduced me to the women in the "single parents lounge," where I ensconced myself, doing long interviews with three women, shorter interviews with three or four more and just listening to everyone who came through.

These were motivated women, most of whom already had earned GEDs and enrolled in college. One of them called her sister-in-law, and that's how I got invited into a home, for a few hours anyway.

The next day I planned to go to a rural elementary school, where I hoped to find women not in educational programs. But it snowed, and school was cancelled.

So I ended up at a shelter for battered women. I did long interviews with two women, both high school dropouts who had not earned GEDs. Both said they wanted to get into a GED program.

Seeking teenagers with babies, I turned to the David School, an alternative high school. Not all the women I interviewed were poor and two came from homes in which their parents had some college. But most came from families with low educational attainment. Almost everyone I talked to mentioned that family is a powerful predictor. They were acutely aware of how hard it would be to break from the patterns of their past.

Charleston, S.C.: Trying to Break the Chain

by Herb Frazier, *Charleston Post and Courier*

Before she was 21, Cheryl House quit high school, had a baby, went on welfare, had two more babies and married an abusive man. She grew up to be all her parents wanted her to become.

"There was not a lot of love in our home," says House, 27, divorced, unemployed and raising three children in a small apartment near Charleston, S.C. "My father was an alcoholic. He would drink and beat my mama. My parents never really encouraged me and my sisters to stay in school. They said 'Do what you want to do. It is your decision. You will have to live with it.' "

The choices House made as a teenager means she does not have a high school diploma, she reads and comprehends on the fifth-grade level and she cannot get a job doing more than mopping floors and serving fast food.

She is one of about 70,000 people, 20% of the adult population in the Charleston area, who have marginal literacy skills. They are caught in a complicated trap of circumstances that make it difficult for them to read to their children, find a good job or break free from a cycle of poverty.

House wants her children, especially her daughters, to avoid the mistakes she has made. She dreams of owning a house, finding a job and getting off welfare: "I can survive. But I don't have a good enough education yet to do the things I really want to do. I want to make things better, instead of just get by."

Cheryl Dearice Jones House is the third oldest of four girls raised in a Navy family that moved frequently. "We have seen a lot of things and a lot of sights traveling around the country, from California to Long Island. We even lived in Japan for a while," she says.

She fondly remembers a trip to Disneyland and the summer she and her sisters dug up a dinosaur bone in the California desert. Those are the few happy memories of living with parents who fought constantly and seemed not to care about their children's future. "Maybe they were too involved in working to have time to take an interest in what we wanted to do," she says.

House's mother never read to her children. If it had not been for her elementary school teachers, House says she would never have started to read. But high school teachers, she believes, did not challenge her. After her father, a Navy enlisted man, divorced her mother, the family moved to a government-funded housing project in Norfolk, Va. At Grandy High School in Norfolk teachers "encouraged us to study and have fun. They gave me one-on-one help. But if we did not want to do the work, no one made us do it."

Although she was in a reading class for students with learning disabilities, she did well in math. "Math fascinated me. I have always been curious about numbers. I was on grade-level with math. But I was in the slow class, the LD class, for reading. I got bored doing the same thing over and over again, so I lost interest. If I was challenged, if they had put me in the class with regular kids, I think I would have finished high school," House says.

Her interest in school declined further after her older sister, Tonya, introduced her to Bennie House, a 21-year-old sailor. Cheryl Jones was 14 and in the ninth grade when she met Bennie. Because her mother was at work most of the time, "we ran wild and did whatever we wanted to. Bennie was my first love. Two years later, I was pregnant with Jamil."

After Jamil was born in November 1981, House dropped out of school in the 11th grade, got on welfare and stayed home to care for her son. "Bennie did not want to support the baby. But the Navy took money out of his pay for child support. I also got welfare. My mom was working. I was getting about $160 a month in AFDC and another $170 a month in food stamps. My other sister, Angie, got pregnant when she was 18, so we had a house full of babies."

Following Jamil's birth, House said she stopped dating his father "because Bennie was seeing another woman. But for the sake of Jamil, we got back together." Two more children came from this relationship, Coco in 1983 and Dominique in 1985. The couple married after Dominique's birth.

"It was nice," she remembers. "I was happy. I spent most of the time with the kids. He was too busy going to sea. While he was gone, the pressure was on me to do everything. If something broke, I fixed it. A lot is expected of a Navy wife."

Their marriage later became troubled. They fought. "He would choke me and one time he smashed a glass in my face," she says. "I stayed with him . . . I hung on to him when I could have gone on with my life. I regret that."

Bennie Jones was transferred in August 1989 to the naval base in Charleston. That November, he abandoned the family.

They were divorced in January. It is now up to her, in typical Navy-wife fashion, to be mother, father and teacher to three energetic children who compete for her attention during the hour she sets aside daily for homework. House demands that the children do school work before they eat a snack and play outside.

"Mama, Mama I don't want to do this cause it is hard," Dominique says coyly, waving a mimeographed sheet of math homework over her head. "I don't know how much nine plus three is." Dominique thought for a moment, got some help from her sister Coco, then says, "I know, I know. It is 12."

Dominique, 6, is an inquisitive child who takes her toys apart to see how they work. "One time she took the waterbed apart and it flooded the bedroom," her mother says.

Dominique, a first grader, is not doing well with reading. House has written words on cards and uses them daily to help her. "Stop," says Dominique, pronouncing the word on a flash card and saying each letter. She sat on the floor surrounded by small white cards with a word printed on them in green letters. Her mother told her to take some of the cards and arrange them to make a sentence. She laid three cards end to end. "I can't stop," she says, reading the sentence she formed with the cards.

Coco, 8, is in the second grade. Unlike her younger sister, she is an excellent reader, her mother says. Although Coco's teacher is supportive, House was not satisfied with her progress. She decided last summer to keep Coco in the second grade.

"Coco could not write in cursive, and her spelling was not that good. I felt she did not know enough to go on to the third grade. It was a hard decision to make, but I knew she did not know as much as those other kids. I think I know what they should and shouldn't be doing. I am going to stay on their backs until they do it," House says firmly. Coco agrees with her mother's decision to hold her back. "I wasn't happy last year. I am happy now. I am learning."

Coco and Dominique are adjusting to not having their father at home. Jamil, a 10-year-old third grader, is suffering the most from the breakup of the family. "He would steal things out of the house and get into fights at school with other kids who teased him and call him 'Big Man' because he is two years behind in school and bigger than other children in his class," says House. "He needs his daddy. He is learning that his daddy is not going to be around that much."

But Jamil is improving and is an excellent reader, according to his mother. A shy boy, he sat close to his mother on the sofa during an interview. He likes math, "But I don't like English. It is boring."

Although they are young, the children quickly answer when asked what they want to do when they grow up. Jamil wants to join the Army and drive a tank "because it looks like fun."

"I want to be a doctor," Dominique says.

Holding back laughter, Jamil says, "Coco want to work at McDonalds."

They all laugh, except Coco. She runs to where he is sitting on the sofa, jumps in his lap and puts her face near his, saying, "No! No! I want to be in the military. I want to fly a plane."

The study period is often interrupted with banter between the children. House also can be playful. She teases Jamil about a Valentine card he wants to give to a girl at school. But she quickly becomes stern to keep the children focused on their work. She threatens to send Dominique to her room if she does not concentrate. Her interaction with her children is designed to keep peace in the home.

Trying To Read

House reads to her children daily. "I read Dr. Seuss, the newspaper and books we get from the library. But, I am limited to what I can do. Sometimes I don't know the words and we try to sound them out together. It is frustrating," she says. "The kids don't really say anything because I have limitations. At least they know I am trying."

She believes she has a good relationship with teachers and staff at A.C. Cockran Elementary where her children attend school. She attends school functions and visits frequently to get reports on their progress, especially Jamil's. "I've gone to that school so many times now they all know me. The school is giving me good reports."

She does not have faith, however, in all teachers. Some, she says, do not care. "Kids now aren't learning as much it seems. Dominique's teacher still does not take as much time out for her, and Dominique is frustrated. She just gives her a piece of paper and tells her to do the work," she says.

House is trying to do all of the things her mother did not do for her. "I encourage them to go to school and do what they are suppose to do. I tell them, you have to go through school to get through life. They are doing the best they can."

House is also trying to better herself. Last September, she enrolled in a local literacy program that meets three days a week from the morning to early afternoon. House is one of 25 adults enrolled in the Basic Enhancement of Skills and Talent (BEST) program that helps adults do more than improve their

reading skills, says Carol Ward, president of the Trident Literacy Association.

One hundred years ago in the South, it was thought that only the elite needed to know how to read, Ward says. "We see some of that attitude remaining, but we are becoming a more sophisticated society as low-skilled jobs go to foreign countries."

House is a victim of that legacy, and some businesspeople believe she, and people like her, are lazy and only want public assistance, Ward says. "But you cannot expect someone who has only seen poverty and illiteracy to get out of that cycle. To expect that in general is just ignorance on our part. I feel a social and moral responsibility to help, but not only with a hand out but with a hand up."

The BEST program, begun in May 1991, goes beyond literacy skills. Instructors teach students world processing and life skills and talk about anything students are interested in, from AIDS and drug abuse to cosmetology school. Students meet for 12 hours each week for three months. They can repeat the program as many times as they like.

BEST is funded through private donations and the Trident United Way, serving Charleston, Berkeley and Dorchester counties. House and most of the other students were referred to BEST through the South Carolina Department of Social Services' work support program.

House is a good student and very articulate, Ward says: "She speaks so beautifully; she sparkles and projects."

House wants to earn a GED soon and try to get into college to "try to do what I want to do for once in my life. I want to be a computer programmer." She plans to enroll this fall in Trident Technical College, one of South Carolina's 16 technical schools created to help the state produce better trained workers and attract industry. "I want to go to Trident to get a degree to have it take me as far as I can go. That is my dream. But mostly, I want to read."

Not having a high school diploma "makes it real hard to find a job," House says. Often when she goes on a job interview and tells prospective employers she is a high school dropout and cannot read well, she gets turned away. When she does find a job, "they want you to work at night. I want to be home with the children at night."

She is confident that she will earn a GED and find a good job. But research suggests she and other Black women stand more of a chance of being in the ranks of the poor and underclass.

"It is working-class females and Blacks of both sexes who are confronted with the greatest difficulties in entering the labor market," according to Sharon Nelson-LeGall of the University of Pittsburgh.

White women and Black people are most "subject to low pay, poor working conditions and little opportunity for advancement. It stands to reason that Black females face such conditions disproportionately," Nelson-LeGall told a meeting of the Educational Testing Service last fall. Schooling does not have the same economic payoff for Black women as it does for men and women of other races, she said.

House and her children live in a two-bedroom apartment in a tiny complex north of historic Charleston. Their neighborhood sits behind a strip of car lots, restaurants and gas stations. It is a close-knit neighborhood, she says, where on the weekends families come together to cook crabs and oysters. She is not worried that drugs and violence have invaded the complex. "I am not worried about my kids being in a bad neighborhood," she says. "There is no drug problem here. The only problem is the landlord don't keep the place up. But it is a good neighborhood."

House has a monthly income of $829. She gets $500 a month in child support from the children's father. She also receives $292 in food stamps but only $37 in AFDC payments. Bennie House will be discharged from the Navy in four years, but not from the responsibility of supporting his children, House says. "I can't show him no slack or no mercy. He's got three kids to feed, and I am going to hold that over his head. He knows what will happen if he does not pay."

Her former husband, she explains, did not show her any consideration when she was a high school student. "All he wanted me to do was be with him. He did not encourage me to finish school," she says. "The school also was not ideal. I used to feel down on myself. I wish I had gone to school where I could have felt good about myself and what I wanted to do."

When she was 14, "I had dreams that I would finish high school and go to college. It was never in my mind that I would have three kids before I got married. I try to encourage my daughters to stay in school and when they are old enough I will explain to them about men and birth control so they don't have to think they got to depend on a man. They can depend on themselves, if they finish school."

Tips for Reporters

Editors sometimes ask reporters to do the impossible and find that unique person through whom a story can be told to make it believable. With that in mind, it did not appear that a seemingly routine assignment to profile a single mother who has low literacy skills would be that difficult. But it was.

It was not difficult to conduct the interview or write the profile. The tough part was finding people will-

ing to allow me to invade their privacy and to tell me their story.

Obviously, not every adult wants to admit he or she, because of circumstances sometimes beyond their control, failed to get an education and cannot read well. And, it is even more painful for them to admit it in the presence of their children.

There were two false starts before finding the courageous woman who opened her heart and home for this chronicle of the mistakes she has made and plans she has for rectifying her life.

To do a story like this, give yourself additional time because some people may get cold feet at the last moment and back out. Your best sources of finding people with low literacy skills are state and county social service agencies and continuing education and literacy programs.

Avoid saying you are looking for people "who can't read." That shows insensitivity and it will immediately turn people off. You should carefully explain what kind of story you want to write and what impact you hope it will make on increasing the awareness of illiteracy among the public and policymakers.

Do not be surprised that people who cannot fully comprehend what they read or who cannot read at all are able to articulate their feelings. Cheryl House communicates well orally. I was concerned that someone reading her quotes might think I made them up. But I did not. So, do not assume that it would be like "pulling teeth" to interview a person with low literary skills.

Baltimore, Md.: Aching To Do Better

by Gelareh Asayesh

The second quarter report cards start trickling out on a sunny first week of February, flimsy pink slips full of ominous codes and fine print. In Bernadette Green's third-story room overlooking the fire escape and the tarred roof of the rowhouse next door, Chuckie, 15, is silently unhappy. He knows what to expect. "I think I'm on the border now," he says, his tall frame folded on an edge of the bed next to his little sister, Crystal, and his mother, Bernadette. "I failed some of my exams, and that probably brought my grades down."

Chuckie is in 10th grade at Baltimore City College, one of a handful of academically exclusive public schools in Baltimore. Getting accepted at City was an achievement. He is competing with students who live in big Victorian homes in privileged Roland Park, not in one room in a decaying row house in Harlem Park, paid for out of Bernadette's monthly welfare check.

Downstairs the dim living room fills with cigarette smoke and visitors most every evening as the afternoon soap operas give way to prime time shows. Bernadette and her mother are the tenants, but the house is a gathering place for other family members who lose jobs and housing. Roaches skitter on the walls and men's voices are frequently raised in anger. Often, the police have to be called to end a quarrel.

The third-floor room is clean and quiet, brightly painted in blue and orange by the children's father, an industrial painter. Bernadette has decorated the walls with pictures of cartoon characters, Crystal's art work, and pictures of the Rev. Martin Luther King, Jr. The room is overflowing with belongings, stacked in corners and on the single bed where Chuckie sleeps. The only open space is created by the narrow full-size bed where Bernadette sleeps with Crystal. In one corner next to the TV, green plants, a couple of tangerines, soap in a dish and a row of clean wash cloths line the window sill. The casement is open to allow the mild winter air to drift into the room. Bernadette has taken down the curtains to wash them. A neatly folded pile of jeans, freshly pressed, sits atop Crystal's dictionary. The roses on the pillow cases are faded with frequent washing. This room is a haven, but for Chuckie, struggling with English and algebra and world history, it is not enough.

Someone from City called the house yesterday. The machine came on, and somehow the message got cut off. All Bernadette knows is that they were calling "about something important to Chuckie's future." The words are ominous, but rather than call the school, Bernadette asked Chuckie to check it out. Now, Chuckie tells her the phone call was about his report card. "You were supposed to come pick it up," he says. Instead, Chuckie will get it tomorrow. Bernadette's desire to avoid the school is a tacit fact between mother and son.

Bernadette hates going to City. A visit to the school brings out all her simmering insecurities, about the way she talks, the way she writes. At 36, she has never made more than $4.50 an hour, and she was laid off about a year ago from her last job as a packer at a bagel shop down on Reisterstown Road. Her experiences have undercut her confidence rather than built it. "When you go in there you gotta go to the office and you gotta go to the desk and they ask you to sign your name in and tell you which direction to go in and sometimes they act funny toward you," Bernadette explains. "If I write my name, they look to see if I print and they look away. . . . It's like, she must not be that well-educated."

Bernadette used to volunteer at Crystal's school, where the secretary is a friendly lady who lives in the area and lent Crystal a clown shirt last Halloween. But she stopped going about a year ago. She showed up at a meeting as usual, and there were refreshments, as usual. And when the principal spoke, she said parents should not come to the school just to drink coffee or hot chocolate, and eat Danish or donuts. They should come to work.

"When she said that, that like turned me off and I never went back," Bernadette says. Not even to see a picture of Crystal in her safety patrol uniform standing next to one of those dummies that are on TV in simulated car crashes. The picture is up in the main office, and Bernadette would love to see it. "I was thinking about easing up there and saying hi to the secretary," she muses now.

When her children were little, she taught them their colors and shapes and nursery rhymes. She felt good about giving them a head start. She kept closer tabs on what was happening at school back then. But now, "I don't know what's down there other than the little bits of information that she comes home with," Bernadette says. "But I just go along with it. It's not

that I don't care, it's that I have other things on my mind or I might be depressed. So I let them (the school) do their part. And I'll do my thing here. Sometimes, I don't do anything at all."

And Chuckie is struggling.

When asked what is his favorite class at school, he grins, showing a dimple, laughing at himself. "Gym," he says. Crystal, burrowing under a blanket on the bed, laughs too. Crystal is in the fourth grade, a bright-eyed, happy-go-lucky nine-year-old. Her school career still seems to her to be a wide-open stretch, free of obstacles. She loves all her classes - English, math, science. The other day in science she learned how to power a light bulb with one dry cell and a wire. The codes on her pink slip translate into Goods and Satisfactories, a couple of Excellents, and Needs Improvement in only one area—oral communication.

Great Promise, No Encouragement

Bernadette's brow is furrowed as she asks a visitor what that phrase really means. She concentrates intensely, her whole being directed toward absorbing the answer. She wants to know how she can help. Her children are her life, she says. Bernadette was 21 when she had Chuckie and so overprotective that she would not even leave him with his grandmother. Crystal was an accident, but beloved nonetheless. She chose the name because it was "pure," and so was the brand new baby. After Crystal, Bernadette had her tubes tied because she does not believe in having children when you cannot provide for them. She worries about Chuckie and Crystal's future, afraid it will be like hers. School never prepared her like she needed to be prepared to succeed, she says. When she was an honors student at Baltimore's Dunbar High School, next in prestige to the exclusive schools like City, nobody explained to her how vital college was to getting a decent job. So she lived by the standards of her family, where finishing high school was accomplishment enough.

And now, aching for a life of her own, a place of her own, Bernadette feels cheated. It is a depression that she cannot quite shake, not even for her children's sake. She thinks about going back to school. Chuckie wants her to. "If she'd go back to school, she'd be able to help us better with our homework," he says.

But Bernadette is not sure what she wants to do. English was her favorite subject in high school: "I got to learn big words and the meanings of them. Like 'acquittal' and 'adhere' and 'capitulate'. Stuff like that. But I don't use them, that's the thing. I think that's because of where I'm living and the people I'm around."

She wants to read more. But somehow she never does. She judges herself harshly for this flaw. Hungry for inspiration, she listens to gospel radio shows. Shut up in her room on the third floor, she writes down what she hears, her hand speeding across the page. She writes in little blue and pink memo books. On one page is her grocery list. Next are groups of numbers—she plays the Maryland state lottery regularly, unless she hits an unlucky streak. Then there is a brief summary of a letter from the school system. On one page, she's jotted down, "boy, Kevin, 9/31" to note the birth of a son to her niece. Scattered throughout the book are the bits of gospel. Occasionally she misspells words in her hurry to get them down.

10/18/91—"Don't let Satan move you off God's ground. . . ."

10/22/91—"1) Stand on God's territory, 2) Having put on the truth belt, gird your waste (sic) with the truth, 3) Get back to the absolute standard of truth. . . ."

10/24/91—"Prayer is communicating with God. Pray always for all sakes. . . ."

"One day," says Bernadette. "I'm going to get a big book and put it all together. . . . It's like schooling too."

The traumas of the house and neighborhood erode her good intentions. The three of them live on $280 a month, plus food stamps and help from the children's father, who lives nearby and just got laid off. Toward the end of each month, their diet becomes more bland as the food stamps disappear. At dusk, she waits until the last minute to turn the lights on, conserving electricity. And these are the least of her problems. There is no peace in the house, no security. People come and go, always drinking, sometimes carrying drugs. Last month the police arrested her brother for pulling a knife on her other brother after an argument over the TV. Her nephew's father was recently shot up in a drug bust in the notorious Baltimore housing project Murphy Homes. A few days later, Bernadette is upset because a close friend has been busted for possessing drug paraphernalia. She had to take care of the woman's baby.

She hates it so much she took the children to a shelter once, but the shelter was worse. Now, the set of cereal bowls and spoons Bernadette keeps up in the room is a symbol of her attempt to separate her life and her children's from what surrounds them. But though the third floor room is a haven, it is only a temporary one.

Last night, Bernadette pulled out an encyclopedia from a set the children's father bought a couple of years ago and looked up names of countries for Crys-

tal's homework assignment. It made her feel good to be able to answer her daughter's questions. It made Crystal feel good to go to school prepared. But today, Bernadette discovers that Crystal got the assignment wrong after all. She was supposed to look up counties, not countries. Bernadette takes the news hard. "How I wished I could have been more helpful for her," she says softly.

As for Chuckie, he has traveled out of her reach. There have been periods when she has helped him with his homework, made greater efforts. That was during his years at Harlem Park Middle School, when Bernadette got help from a dropout prevention group called With and For Parents. The funding for the group ended, and after a while, Chuckie says, so did Bernadette's extra efforts. Bernadette acknowledges this, painfully aware of the need to do better, to redeem her life by devoting it to her children. "I'm not saying that my life is over with, but this is part of their development," she says. "I need to do more with their growing. Guiding them. Don't put myself first, put them first."

Chuckie wants to be an artist, like his father, but he is vague about the details. He says he wants to go to college, like his father, who dropped out after a year. But he says it without force. His sentences often begin with the words: "I guess." He is weighed down with the prospect of failure, as though his desires have nothing to do with his ability to reach them.

"I feel like I'm alone," he says.

Yearning for 'Peace and Silence'

In the West Baltimore housing project where Bertha Moore lives with her teenaged son Charles, her daughter Charlene, and Charlene's daughter Shaneka, there are report cards in abundance this week. Bertha's other daughter, Christine, is visiting, and she expects the usual Goods and Excellents from her kindergartner, Kashon. Charlene's Shaneka, an elfin second-grader, got $5 when she presented her report card. The little codes on Shaneka's pink slip translated into lots of Satisfactories this time, instead of all those Needs Improvements. For 'Neka, who a year ago could not read because of learning disabilities, it is a wonderful achievement.

It is a different story with Charles, struggling through 10th grade at Carver Vocational-Technical school. A tall, self-possessed 15-year-old, he is failing geometry and barely scraping by in every subject except his trade, which is carpentry. Bertha is upset. "It really hurt me really bad," she says. "I'm going to have to get with his teachers every week." Bertha, who at 50 is a grandmother several times over, feels especially responsible for her son's troubles. In November, she left her husband of 32 years and moved in with Charlene. Just after Christmas, she told Charles why. Her husband is accused of molesting his three daughters, Charlene, Christine and Gretchen.

Social workers took Gretchen out of the house when the girl was 11, but it took Bertha another 17 years to leave. The burden of guilt has been heavy in that time. Charles is struggling to come to terms with something that seems incomprehensible to him, and it makes school harder than it already is. "I'll just be in class daydreaming, wondering what happened," he says. He yearns for tranquility. For an English assignment, he has written a poem called "The Ghetto." It goes like this:

On one corner drugs/On the other corner thugs/
On another corner hookers/Around the corner
Knockers/Up that street gangs/Down the street gangs/
Downtown crews/Beating people down for hats and
shoes/In the ghetto there's always violence/But one
day/I hope for peace and silence.

The problems are not all from home—his geometry class has 50 students in it, and he can barely hear the teacher speak. Not long ago, Charles lost his school books—but he says his teacher still made him take all the tests. His disgust with the school makes it harder for him to try to do well. His potential shows in his work. But Charles is not sure if he wants to go to college. Work seems more relevant. "I want to get my trade first," he says. "Cause you'll be getting beaucoup money, and it's fun."

Bertha wants Charles to go to college. More than ever before, she feels capable of helping him succeed. After a lifetime of grinding poverty and sordid family secrets—her adoptive father molested her as a child—Bertha's life has taken a turn for the better. She dropped out in her senior year of high school to get married, just to escape home in rural Sampson County, North Carolina. Last year, at the age of 49, she went back to school. She graduated from high school on June 13th. She left her husband Nov. 29th. She feels her life is just beginning.

The blossoming began four years ago, with the friendly encouragement of a woman named Belle Chandler, the parent liaison at Harlem Park Middle School. When Charles started at Harlem Park, Chandler encouraged Bertha to volunteer, and volunteering helped Bertha come out of her shell. Chandler was warm and friendly. She taught Bertha to talk on the phone; identifying herself properly. She took Bertha to parent conferences, where Bertha felt like she was somebody because she was representing

School as an Alien Place

In Harlem Park, people do not open their doors to strangers. Jocelyn Garlington, a lifetime Baltimore resident, discovered this four years ago when she came to the neighborhood to help start the dropout prevention project. The project started by the National Committee for Citizens in Education in Washington, D.C., focused on 150 families, getting to know them, and supporting their children through Harlem Park Middle School.

The project's workers first met many of those families through the window. They would be out there on the sidewalk, craning their necks to look up. The person they had come to meet would be leaning on the window sill, looking down. Window conversations, Garlington wrote later in the book that described her three-and-a-half years in Harlem Park, protect safety and privacy in a place where community survives in pockets.

She called the book *Helping Dreams Survive*. The goal was to help break the cycle of despair that lives in places like Harlem Park. It used to be a preferred address for well-to-do black families, and some still live there. It is a neighborhood of once-lovely rowhouses painted in rich hues of rose and red, gray and pale green and beige, with fine architectural moldings and marble stoops. There is a church on nearly every corner in Harlem Park, some of them grand edifices of gray stone with stained glass windows. But many of the houses are boarded up now. And in the bright February sunshine, the bare trees are festooned with refuse; wisps of plastic garbage bags, a bit of black tubing.

The demographics of Harlem Park Middle School tell the same old story of poverty allied to failure. The 1991 state report card for the school shows that 81% of the school's 1,400 students were eligible for federally subsidized free and low-price lunches. One fifth were assigned to special education classes. A full 70% missed more than a month of school last year. Of those who graduated from Harlem Park, moving on to the ninth grade, only 34% passed the state functional test in math. The school's graduates did better in reading -nearly 78% passed. Both tests are intended to measure eighth-grade skills.

Among the children's parents, Garlington discovered a familiar pattern. Many of the parents had failed, either in school or in the working life that school was supposed to prepare them for. They may have learned reading and writing and arithmetic but not the broader literacy of what to wear to a job interview, how to speak, what buttons to push in the machinery of power. Gradually, many had become alienated, relegated to a margin of society. Now their children were risking the same fate.

Much of this sense of alienation was directed against school as an institution. This was a phenomenon familiar to Garlington from her years in adult literacy, when people preferred a long hike to the library to entering the neighborhood school house. Their feelings about school were visceral, Garlington saw, a "big blur of hurt and defeat." Because of those feelings, parents developed the same evasions that some people bring to their taxes, or a visit to the dentist. What's more, though the traditional black belief in education as the pathway to success held strong in Harlem Park, something was missing.

"I think most every parent feels that education and doing well in school are the keys to being successful," Garlington says. "They really believe it. All of them believe it. Unfortunately, there are not enough people who've gone to school who've done well, who are happy, successful people, to make the connection visible. So that it's a given that you go to school and you'll be successful."

Who is responsible for breaking the cycle? Politicians and the public blame the city schools, which have been in flux for years as superintendent after superintendent tackled deep-rooted problems. Schools tend to blame the parents. Parent involvement these days is a catch phrase, a panacea. A national ad campaign by a teachers' union has coined the motto: "Show me a parent who cares, and I'll show you a child who can learn." As Garlington sees it, educators are setting up constructs in which if you care, you are involved in your child's school. If you care, you will come to meetings, read to your child 20 minutes a day, do this, that and the other regardless of the obstacles. If you care, you will overcome all obstacles.

The trouble is, she says, that educators are setting the terms for acceptable parental involvement without bothering to explore the realities of families, their strengths and potential. "I think a lot of times people in the school feel their role is to rescue these kids from these families because these families are in such bad shape," Garlington says. "When a lot of people talk about parent involvement, they're not talking about a partnership, sharing, learning from parents. They're talking about parents being there on command. They want parents to do what they want them to do when they want them to do it and how they want them to do it. . .then everything would be beautiful."

Though schools are full of individuals who care, schools as an institution are failing people like those who live in Harlem Park, Garlington believes. They are geared to a model of the family that stems from an idealized past. They withhold from parents the services they extend to their children, smaller classes, better facilities. They withhold information, except in limited doses, often administered at meetings. Most of all, they withhold respect. They do not give parents enough credit.

"All people care about their kids," Garlington says. "They may not have the best parenting style or they may not have enough knowledge about the developmental stages . . . but they do care."

the school. Most importantly, Chandler told Bertha that she could do it.

It was a new message for Bertha. She can recite word-for-word her father's favorite disparagement: "You are so stupid you can't pour piss out of the boot without directions on the heel."

School had been an escape for her as a child. As a parent, school once again became a refuge and an avenue to betterment. Through the school, she met Jocelyn Garlington and was hired as office manager for With and For Parents. At first she was terrified. But she discovered that she could do what they asked of her. She worked with parents and was popular for her warmth and stoicism. She taught herself how to use the wordprocessor, which became the project's gift to her upon her graduation.

"All my life I'd been told I was stupid and that stuck with me and I thought I couldn't learn to do anything," Bertha says. "At this age, I learned that I wasn't stupid." Now, she faces new challenges: mending the rents in the fabric of her family, helping her youngest through school, pursuing her education, finding housing and a better job—her welfare check supplements her work as a telemarketer for the American Veterans Association. Bertha alternates between painful excitement and an all-too-familiar depression. She sees the patterns of the past repeating themselves, and it is daunting. She fights back by hoarding encouragement, looking for the bright spots in her life.

Breaking the Cycle

"It is hard to break out of a cycle," Bertha says. "When I look at it sometimes, I still get depressed. But I am a strong woman. I AM a strong woman. That's why I'm determined to work with my son. He is not going to fail."

Her dream is college for herself, beckoning like the promised land. Her eyes light up when she talks of it. "It's just like indescribable," she says. "It's just like my brain, it just opened back up. I'm really looking forward to the years ahead. I know it's going to be rough and I know it's going to be tough, but my goal is to graduate. I don't care how long it takes. And don't ask me what I want to be," she adds, smiling. "Because I haven't decided yet."

Christine walks up the narrow stairway to the second floor where Charlene's townhouse begins. She is returning from picking up five-year-old Kashon, all bundled up in parka and bookbag. Charlene accosts her sister instantly, irritated to discover that Christine has read her datebook entries. "You're nosey," Charlene says. Christine, a big woman with laughing dark eyes, is unabashed. "I used to read your diary too," she says, grinning.

At 30, Charlene is the eldest of Bertha's five children, three years older than Christine. She is the difficult one, often abrupt, still angry from grievances common to first-born children, yet full of love for her family. Charlene is the bookworm and the TV buff. Her life centers around cable. Television, she will tell you, gave her more love than any man ever did. What's more, it cannot get you pregnant. Today she is ensconced as usual in the corner easy chair, dividing her attention effortlessly between the TV, various conversations, a historical novel by Jean Plaidy titled *The Royal Road to Fotheringay* and, occasionally, the datebook.

The sisters and their brother, Tyron, 29, are talking about their childhood. Bertha was the backbone of the family, getting her children ready for school each day, taking them to the library twice a month. Going to and from school in East Baltimore, they were always pursued by a gang of their classmates. Charlene would run, so would Tyron. Christine would fight. Gretchen would hide. The fighting did not end until the family established their place in the neighborhood pecking order with one glorious, historic fight when Charlene was in junior high and the younger children were all at Montebello Elementary. It started over Christine's refusal to be a lookout for some youth planning a break-in. The fight eventually involved a cousin, Bertha, her husband, and half the neighborhood. Bertha had to go to the hospital afterward for a dislocated shoulder and a bleeding mouth, but they gained respect.

From One Escape to Another

School was an escape from home. Yet with the exception of Charlene, all the older children failed at one time or another. Tyron dropped out when he was 17 to join the Army because his father had a heart attack and the family needed the income. Bertha cried when he left school. Gretchen dropped out in eighth grade. Christine graduated on time after making up two grades, but was labeled a problem child in junior high. That was when she was gaining so much weight that Bertha had to make her clothes for her. "The incest made us fat," Christine says.

"To be truthful, all of Momma's children is smart," says Charlene. "But with things going on at home . . . School was the only outlet 'cause it got us out of the house. But yet we didn't do good in school because of what was going on at home."

"Charlene," Christine asks. "You never failed, did you?"

"Mom wouldn't let me," says Charlene. "She was harder on me than the others. She used to beat me if I didn't do my homework."

Bertha sees herself in Charlene's relationship with Shaneka. Charlene pushes 'Neka to do well just as Bertha pushed Charlene. Charlene says she is not as hard on her daughter as Bertha used to be with Charlene. Bertha subsides into silence. Charlene used to read to Shaneka when she was little, but stopped when 'Neka got older. Now, Charlene spends as little time as possible talking to 'Neka because "She irks me so." She and Shaneka are too much alike, Charlene says. And yet, "The two best things I ever did was graduate from high school and have Shaneka."

Charlene gave up a job as a housekeeper in a Columbia, Md., hotel last year because she did not feel her babysitter was taking good care of Shaneka. She pays a 10-year-old across the street $10 a month to walk 'Neka to and from school. Charlene hates her life not just because it is a disappointment but because she does not have the money to give Shaneka things she needs—like more clothes. But Charlene has given Shaneka her love of books. 'Neka often reads out loud to herself, from her Curious George books, or books on whales and dinosaurs. "When I want her to get out of my face I say go read a book," Charlene says. "I think reading open up doors for you, I really do."

One afternoon during report card week, Shaneka is home from school, wandering around the living room. The TV is on. "I got 100 on my math test today," she says to Charlene.

"I know, honey," Charlene says. "You told me. Did you pass your spelling test?"

"Yeah," Shaneka says.

"How do you know?" Charlene demands.

"Cause I got everything right," Shaneka says.

"Come here," Charlene says. "Let me see. How do you spell 'peaches'?"

"P-E-A-C-H-E-S," Shaneka spells. Her mother is satisfied. Last night, Charlene and 'Neka fought because the child wanted to watch Michael Jackson's latest video. Charlene thought if Shaneka could learn the words to Michael Jackson's songs, she could learn to spell "peaches." She was right. "She keeps saying that she's dumb," Charlene says. "I keep saying you're not dumb. You can do it."

On the couch, Christine takes out her son Kashon's first quarter report card, which she carries in her wallet. She keeps a scrapbook of his achievements, too. "He can count to 50," Christine says with pride. "Read stories." Christine is a doting Mom, both with Kashon and her two-year-old, Karon. She lives with Karon's father, John, and the two often read to the children. Christine hates reading, though she likes to write songs. "I can't get out of reading to my oldest child," she says. "He'll have that nighttime bedtime story every night. I'll be trying to flip extra pages. I'll be trying to get that book over with. He says, Ma, you missed some pages."

Kashon got his library card at the age of four. They make library trips monthly, borrowing the books on his booklist from school. Christine goes to PTA meetings—it helps that at his school, they are held in the morning when the streets are safer. She walks her son to school, pops into the lunchroom, chats with his teacher. She is a familiar face at school—which is exactly how she wants it. The first time she showed up to talk to Kashon's pre-school teacher about his report card, "the teacher talked to me like I was a child," Christine recalls. "She had like 12 interviews. All of the women that came in were under 20, but they had pre-school children. So when I come in there, she talks to me the same way. I had to say to her that I was 21 when I had him. I'm a grown woman.

"So some of these mothers are teenage mothers," Christine continues. "But because they're teenagers, because they're on welfare, some of the teachers and some of the higher-ups in the school treat them with disrespect." Christine will not tolerate such treatment. Always assertive, at 27 she is coming of age. She is unhappy with her life and wants to improve it. In the past five months, she has lost 100 pounds, dropping to 230. Sticking to the diet helps her feel she can meet other goals—like school. She wants to be a lawyer.

Charlene screams with laughter. Christine grins, but does not waver. "What kind of law you want to do, criminal?" Charlene asks, her laughter subsiding. "Real estate law," Christine says. She wants to go to Towson State University in neighboring Baltimore County. How will she pay for it? Christine is stumped for a moment. "Financial loans," she says triumphantly, like somebody who just scored 100 on a test. Charlene teases her sister about not knowing the difference between a B.S. and a B.A., but Christine is unmoved. "See, I want a job where I'm going to have money in the bank, a nice job, and buy my own home," Christine says. "I want a job where I can take care of my own children, their health care, and where I can make sure that all of their needs is fulfilled. And that's going to take education."

Charlene has her own dreams. She wants to be a bank teller. She wants to go to college to improve her skills—for example, her grammar. Like Christine, Charlene at 30 is starting to come to terms with her life. "My life stinks," she says. "I feel like I could have done things, but I just sat back and stood in my own misery. I didn't want to get past it, I just wanted to wallow in it. And by the time I woke up, 30 years have gone by."

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Bertha's graduation from high school, her plans to go to college, provided a powerful motive for change. "It was jealousy," says Charlene. "When she said she was going to college, I said, you ain't beating me to college," Christine says. "If my mother at the age of 49 could come and get her high school diploma, then me at 27, I could go on and get my degree. There's a lot that I could achieve."

Tips for Reporters

I found the subjects for my profiles through an intermediary—Jocelyn Garlington. It is a procedure I highly recommend for making the connection and paving the way. Her relationship with these women is one of trust and affection. It was up to me to get that trust to extend to me.

Our first meeting was at a MacDonald's. I asked almost no questions necessary to the story. Instead, I explained to them what it was about and we talked about what getting involved in this would mean for them. I assured them that I would not expose any detail of their life without their approval and promised that I would check with them at the writing stage to get them to sign off on certain things. In response to their questions about how much control I had over the finished product, I assured them I would track the story through the editing process. Big, touchy issues like the incest in Bertha's family I handled gradually, urging her to think about it, talking it over with her repeatedly, showing she and her family copies of previous EWA reports to give them a sense of what this would look like. It helped that the report is not sold at street corners. I tried to be honest with them about the risks involved in telling their story, but also suggested that it could be a meaningful, cathartic experience for them.

The interviews were conducted over the course of three or four meetings, allowing the relationship between us to progress. Each time I sensed their discomfort or unease, we would talk about it. Once or twice, they called Garlington for additional reassurance. I tried to give them a sense that they had some control over the story and indeed left it up to them whether to include certain details. By and large, they opted for openness.

There were other sensitive issues. Some of the women rightly concluded that a story about literacy was really about illiteracy. Like anybody, they were sensitive about how they would be portrayed and sensitive to the notion that they might be perceived as illiterate. I tried to reassure them by being honest about how I saw them: as caring women with a lot to offer. I talked about literacy as a limitless range and asked them to place themselves on the spectrum. They were honest about their shortcomings, indeed tended to exaggerate them.

Some key points that emerged:

—Remember that maintaining reciprocity is important—especially when your subject is a private citizen with nothing to gain. I tried to let them know that I was learning a lot from them. I frequently took lunch or a snack to their homes when I visited, in appreciation for their opening their homes to me. I told them quite a bit about myself. And I kept my promises.

—These women were selected from a pool of 150 families that Garlington worked with. She felt that they represented the high end on the scale of literacy and accomplishments. I think, though, that it would be a mistake to consider them atypical. In fact, the lesson here is that there is no typical—or stereotypical—woman representing the large numbers of single mothers on public assistance. Obviously, though, there are layers of accomplishment. To penetrate those requires a considerable investment of time, since women with the most troubles are frequently the hardest to connect with. One woman Garlington referred me to had no phone, and when I went to her home, I discovered it boarded up. Another woman did not keep her appointment with me, and I was too pressed for time at that point to try again.

—As someone who has spent a long time covering education from the bureaucratic standpoint, it was an education to look at it from the perspective of the home. It would be useful in future stories to look at the schism between home and school. I now think of the two as an estranged couple, each with their own barriers and sense of illusage. The cultural - and physical—gap is immense. As always, it is the children of the divorce who pay the price.

—Inevitably, I went into the interview session with assumptions that I was barely aware of. I expected to find—and try to understand—a laissez faire attitude toward children and their futures. Instead, I found tremendous love, concern and attention -blocked by the women's circumstances, depression and a sense of failure about their lives.

Dallas, Texas: De Nada a Literacy—In One Generation

by David Fritze

Thirteen-year-old Analuz Alagon sleeps on a thin mattress in a closet, nearly buried in the clothes that hang from above.

Despite these dreary arrangements—the best her parents can do to give a developing teenager some privacy in a one-room Dallas apartment—Analuz radiates promise.

A friendly, pretty girl, she is the first of her family's generation to read and write. She makes passing grades at school and talks of becoming a teacher or a doctor. She works hard around the house, and is a tender sister to her four-year-old brother, Jose.

The walls that circumscribe her life, however, threaten to spoil her hopes of getting ahead.

Six months ago, she left rural Mexico to join her mother Victorina and stepfather Jose Trejos in northwest Dallas. The parents had entered the United States illegally in 1989, although Jose, a Salvadoran, is now applying for political asylum.

Analuz cannot speak or read English and is falling behind in her seventh-grade bilingual classes. The problem is that she cannot find help when doing her homework because her parents cannot read or write, even in Spanish. Because she has given up on some assignments, two of her teachers have requested a meeting with one of her parents.

"I don't want my daughter to go through what I went through (in Mexico). I want her to learn something, but I can't help her," says Victorina, who has two other children living with relatives in Mexico. "I don't know anything." As her frustration grows, Analuz longs even more to return to her homeland. She writes letters to her friends, and, in her mother's words, sometimes "she despairs."

If learning English and doing better in school would unlock the door to a happier life here, her circumstances at home make it difficult to fashion the necessary key.

Most of the time, Analuz remains in the cramped apartment. She has no friends in the rundown complex, and her family cannot afford a telephone. Although her mother encourages her to study, the distractions are numerous. She helps her mother take care of neighbors' children to bring in income, and they shop together for discount clothes to resell in the complex. There is not a single book or magazine in the household, the main diversions being a television set, video cassette player and stereo.

Jose takes the family car to his job as a floor tile worker. With $290 in rent and another baby on the way, the fight to survive economically tends to consume the attention of all of the family. Analuz cannot avoid paying the price. It is not that her parents do not care about her education and future. But often they feel powerless to be helpful, given their illiteracy and the limited time and energy that poverty allows.

If anything, they are more motivated than most, having left their countries for a complicated land, determined to earn a better life for themselves and their children.

Since they arrived, no institution has reached out to lend a hand. No one has offered Victorina any advice on caring for her son, on aiding his development or getting him in pre-school. Although Victorina says Analuz's teacher knows her parents cannot read, the school district has not told them of the English or literacy classes it offers to adults free.

A nonprofit assistance group, Proyecto Adelante, soon will offer classes for reading and writing in Spanish at an apartment complex across the street—one of the few courses of its kind in the city. Victorina plans to attend to help both herself and her daughter. "I want to learn something, so I can help her, and so when I go somewhere, [especially] to the doctor, I know where I'm going," she says.

In a state with one of the lowest literacy rates in the nation, thousands of low-income Hispanics, both legalized and illegal, struggle to make their way despite what amounts to a double illiteracy. They cannot speak English, much less read or write it, and can barely write their names in Spanish.

Like many other Americans who are illiterate or low-literate, many are ashamed to admit the problem. Others are refreshingly frank about it, even laughing at their dilemmas and proud of the clever ways they have of getting around their predicament. The power of commanding the written word is something they have never known. Many are from the Mexican hinterlands, where no previous generation knew how to read and write. Public schools were late to reach their village, and even after the teachers and money came, their parents, who were dirt-poor, sent them to work at an early age instead of to school.

By immigrating to the United States in a similar pursuit, they also have brought their children to a

new threshold—the chance to receive a quality education and ultimately gain a much better life.

But without literacy in their native language, the families often are painfully isolated, stuck away in apartments like the Alagons, battling to make ends meet, living in fear of crime, deportation, losing a job and getting even poorer.

"These parents are perceived as uncaring, and that's not true," says Jacqueline Bryant-Turner, director of reading and language arts for the Dallas Independent School District. "They do care, but there are great limitations as to what they can do."

The cycle of low literacy could be perpetuated, even if the children learn to read and write. They may turn to menial jobs just to help their families; such work is the only horizon their parents have known.

The ones who often are most able to encourage parents and children to press ahead in school are teachers. But "the parents have felt alienated in the formal educational environment. They are certainly not going to run back to that environment just because they have a child in it," says Bryant-Turner. "So it is our job to make schools more user-friendly, to make sure that every parent can make a contribution."

Mothers Crossing Cultures

For many immigrants from Mexico and Central America, the role of schooling is seen as hardly critical to getting by in life.

As a child, Victorina, who is 30, went to a small school for two years in southern Mexico, but she frequently missed days or arrived late to classes.

Her mother and father could not read or write, and they scratched out a living for seven children. Her father, who was a security guard, also drank heavily and did not care about his children's education.

"What I did was go to work," Victorina says. "I went to school, but my mama washed clothes for people and made tortillas to sell, and sometimes I arrived late to school. I didn't have time." At age 12, she began working as a maid in houses.

Eraclia Benitez's parents tried to compensate for the lack of available schooling on their ranch in Mexico by hiring someone to teach their daughter. For three months a year, until she was 10, Eraclia, who is now 39, was tutored to read and write. But the single mother of seven, who lives in a squalid house in central Dallas and works two jobs, retains very little. She can barely read the headline in a Spanish newspaper and cannot recite the alphabet.

Despite her parents' best intentions, the clearest message she took from her family was to work. "My mama and papa knew nothing, absolutely nothing, not even how to write their name," she says. "In that time there was nothing like that."

Even for some Hispanics who grew up in the United States and can speak English, the necessity of making a wage elbowed them out of schooling and learning to read when they were young. Lupe Fuentes, a 47-year-old single mother of six, labored on a ranch near Morton in West Texas as a child, feeding cows, planting onions, gathering oranges and potatoes. She and her eight brothers and sisters were held out of school by their father and dispatched to the fields to help shore up the family income. "Nobody said nothing [about them missing school]," she recalls. "We would be working all the time."

In the dark front room of her East Dallas frame duplex, Fuentes describes her life, her failed marriages, her squeezing out a living as a cafeteria worker, with a weary, blank gaze. Several months ago she was diagnosed as having lupus and had to quit her job because she was too weak to work and was having seizures. Within weeks she has gone from obese to plump, taking medicine and making constant trips to the doctor. She is on Medicaid and Aid to Families with Dependent Children.

Dancing around as a contrast are her three daughters and two of her three sons—the oldest, 15-year-old Alex, is in a halfway house for stealing cars and committing other crimes as part of a gang. In the room where they sleep, on the dingy plywood that forms their kitchen floor, these children are a rustle of curious eyes and pent-up energy. They can read and write English or are soundly on their way to learning how.

Fuentes said she also would like to learn to read, to reclaim what she was denied as a child, both for herself and her children.

A visitor from her children's school invited her to join an English as a Second Language class offered at the school. But "now that I got sick, I don't think I can," she says.

Despite a legacy of low-literacy in their families, many immigrant parents say they preach to their children the importance of studying hard and learning to read and write. Since they arrived in urban America, they have realized that work and education standards are rapidly toughening.

"I tell them they should learn English, that they should study because it is going to help them," says Mirian Luna, a 33-year-old mother of four who lives in a north Dallas apartment. "Never can you get a good job without English." Neither Mirian nor her husband, Porfirio Luna, can read or write, although their two oldest children, Elman, 15, and Glenda, 10, have learned.

When one of Lupe Fuentes' children talk of dropping out of school to go to work, "I tell them I don't want them to be like me. I don't read or write or nothing," she says.

However, educators say, many parents lack the most elementary teaching skills to help their children and fail to simply provide the scene and props for their child's learning.

Studying in Her Closet

Their houses are empty of books, yet increasingly jammed with electronic gadgetry. Analuz Alagon has no established place to study—sometimes at a tiny toddler's table, in a tiny chair, or on the patio or in her closet if the music, television or visiting children are too loud.

No one has ever talked to Eraclia Benitez about how to enhance her children's love for reading—and, of course, she cannot read any child development books. If she took the time with her older children to do some of the simple, non-reading things that promote literacy—take them to the library or museums, enlist them in talks about news events or shows to broaden vocabulary, or do hand-eye coordination exercises with her 2-year-old son—it would have to be on the weekend. Eraclia works sometimes 12 hours a day at two jobs, one at a chicken processing factory and another at an office building. She arrives home usually about 10:30 at night. Her older son Odon or his wife care for the children when she is gone. On weekends, she tries to catch up on shopping and chores, rest and relax with her children. Despite the tiring pace, she took time to teach her children some basics when they were young, such as to count (although she can count only up to 500).

In a small way, some parents' illiteracy encourages their children's reading abilities because the parents must depend on their children to adapt. The children read letters and street signs, interpret for them at teacher conferences, help them clip food coupons and read labels at grocery stores.

Because many children, particularly older ones, cannot get help with their homework at home, they turn to alternate advisors, especially teachers and relatives. But for many Hispanic children, this is not enough because relatives may not read; teachers, whose classes are usually full, have little time to devote after hours to being a tutor. And many of them speak no Spanish.

Analuz Alagon occasionally turns to friends but has to call them from outside her home because her family does not have a phone. An angel of mercy for her and a half-dozen other children in the complex is Marivel Calex, a neighbor and Salvadoran immigrant who takes time away from her two small children to give free homework assistance to others. Calex has limited command of English, however, which hinders her advice. The children often still carry their report cards and problems to her before their parents, she says.

Despite their barriers, many of these children are succeeding in learning to read. A sometimes inefficient but well-meaning public school system and mothers who pour out nurturing and love if not the alphabet soup, enable them to break generations of complete illiteracy.

The hazard is that such efforts will lift the children only so high, providing them with basic literacy skills but not the skills to keep them from falling back into the mire of low-skill, low-pay work. Eraclia Benitez's 16-year-old daughter, Guadalupe, says she already is tired of school and would like to go to work. Her brother Santos, 18, is married, working and attending high school where his teachers report that "nothing stays in his head," says Benitez.

The institution most likely to reach out and help them—the school—is unfortunately what they seem to have grown tired of. And the school is not reaching out.

"So often we ask the parents to come to us. But in their minds, if we really care, why don't we come to them?" says Carla Weir, head of the Dallas school district's federally funded Even Start program. It includes in-home visits. When Weir meets a young Hispanic mother who speaks of her life as if it is practically over, as if the only opportunities left are for her children, she gets upset.

"How can a 24-year-old say, 'There is no hope for me'?" she says. "That is what drives me. First I cajole them, then I want to shake them."

Second-hand Paperbacks . . . and Isolation

From a shelf in the room where five children sleep, Lupe Fuentes' 13-year-old daughter Maria and 12-year-old son Albert pull down the only printed materials in their home—eight children's paperbacks, including a cartoon version of "A Tale of Two Cities," 10 *National Geographic* magazines and a Bible.

They did not obtain the books from their school, nor did their mother buy or borrow them—the family has never checked out a book from the public or school library. A local Baptist church, whose bus takes the children to and from Sunday School and worship services every week, gave them the materials.

Albert proudly points to his name embossed on the Bible's cover and says he loves to pore over the

pictures and articles in the magazines. His stated ambitions match his weighty reading.

"A lawyer," he says, "[because] a lawyer makes law rules. . . . I told my mom I'm going to college. She said you can go anywhere when you grow up. You can be anything you want. I want to work. I don't want to be in the streets," he said.

The sole book in the Luna family's possession is titled, "Aprenda a Leer y Escribir (Learn How to Read and Write)," given to Porfirio by a Jehovah's Witness at his door several weeks ago. Because a back injury has kept him from work for several months—he needs an operation—he has had time to learn some letters and words in Spanish.

Neither the Fuentes family nor the Lunas have received a visit at home from someone from their children's schools. Nor has Eraclia Benitez nor Victorina Alagon. Home visits are not required of the district's teachers, although some make them voluntarily. But many do not have time or are afraid to call on homes in some rough neighborhoods, especially at night.

Some parents interviewed have met with teachers or officials at the school, usually to discuss academic or discipline problems with their children. Although none seem reluctant to admit they are functionally illiterate, no teacher of their children discussed at length the parents' inability to assist with homework. Few have been invited to attend a school-sponsored ESL or literacy class.

Jacqueline Bryant-Turner believes the district should make a greater effort to assist low-literate parents in the community and that it tends to ignore the ones who are invisible. Even when assistance programs are in place, the word somehow never gets out to many parents, particularly Spanish-speaking ones.

One example is the district's hotline for homework help, available Monday through Thursday nights for all students. Instructors armed with every book in the curriculum can guide a student through questions in various languages.

Despite her well-known troubles with homework, Analuz has never been told of the hotline number. Nor have any of the parents or children of other families interviewed. While news of the service may have reached some through posters and public service announcements, in a number of cases it never trickled down through teachers to students in class.

The persistent gap between parents and schools is due partly to the inability and hesitance of districts to tackle the community's overwhelming social ills. Teachers say they have enough to deal with in the classroom.

Claudia Morrison, who teaches bilingual kindergarten at the largely Hispanic Bonham Elementary School in Dallas, said she makes home visits to provide information and better understand the family. But unless the topic comes up naturally, she does not feel it is her place to ask the parents whether they can read and write.

"We try to find out [whether a family is illiterate]. We want to help the community," she says. "But how far can it go? It's like you open up a Pandora's box. You find they lack this skill and that skill and it could be a never-ending story."

Nevertheless, bilingual teachers are trained to direct low-literate parents to ESL classes sponsored county-wide by the district, if not to private literacy classes, school officials say.

Few Teachers for Families

The problem is that there often is a shortage of certified Spanish-speaking ESL instructors, and parents may have to travel far to attend classes geared for illiterate adults.

Although many experts say it is easier to learn to read in one's native language than a foreign one, few courses are available to teach literacy in Spanish. Recognizing the need, a bilingual teacher at one elementary school started a class last year and now has a dozen steady participants. Other classes are offered by a church, the Mexican consulate and the nonprofit Proyecto Adelante.

But simply pointing the way to a class does not mean the parent will follow. Eraclia Benitez attended an ESL class provided by one of her employers last year, but attendance was so sparse that it was cancelled. Many Hispanics in jobs whose schedules change weekly, such as restaurants, have trouble committing to such programs.

To better address the endemic causes of educational failure, Dallas' schools continue to expand their in-home visit programs, now serving more than 220 families at 11 sites.

Carla Weir has watched the living-room approach take root and flower, if sometimes in small petals.

She recalls one Hispanic mother who cannot read and who reluctantly agreed to regular home visits and ESL classes. Gradually, she is learning some English and her timidity has abated to the point where she is among the first to respond in class. "If she hadn't had that rapport with the ESL teacher [who also visited her home,] it wouldn't have happened," Weir says.

Personal contact is essential to inspiring parents and children to overcome illiteracy, believes Hector Collazo, assistant director of Centro de Amistad, a

west Dallas organization that provides ESL classes and other assistance to Hispanics.

"It's tough to reach them. It's a one-on-one type of thing. It's a teacher that connects with a student. There's not a magic formula. There's not a magic ad campaign," he says. "Certain people see the light because they're self-motivated. The only thing you can do is show them that light."

Tips For Reporters

To find illiterate Spanish-speaking parents, especially ones not in literacy programs, go to places where the poor often gather. I had the most success at a couple of notary publics, who do translations, mail off for social security numbers, etc. Nonprofit assistance groups which specialize in immigration matters (Catholic Charities, other Central American refugee aid organizations) also can lead you to such families.

Make sure they are illiterate or low-literate. The ones with whom I spoke were not embarrassed to admit they could not read and write. Ask them to read a headline or an ad in a Spanish newspaper.

Make two visits, and try to talk to the children alone as well as with the parent. Kids are not the easiest interviews.

Ask for a tour of their home or apartment: little things can add a lot to the picture of illiteracy.

After talking to the children, round their story out by interviewing their teachers.

In exploring the parents' relationship to schools, ask them and the teachers not only what they have done with and for each other, but what they have not done. The point is to determine the ideal and see how close the relationship comes to it. A cordial teacher-parent meeting that does not even address the illiteracy problem may leave everyone happy and still unable to advance.

Portland, Ore.: To Speak or Not to Speak— The Home Language

by Miko Yim

Life has provided no fairy godmother for Blia Thao Cha. As a single Hmong mother who bore eight children in her 55 years, she knows that answers for her children will not come as easily as they do in fairy tales.

But she turns to tales like the Hmong version of Cinderella to teach her children language skills. "I tell them the stories so that they can remember," she says. "Every story has a beginning, a middle and an end, and always a good lesson about life."

Cha raises her eight children on a single-parent income by polishing desk handles at a Northeast Portland factory. It is menial job that she hopes her children will escape through education. For many years, she has trudged home at 2:30 p.m. after a full day of work to be home for her children.

"What did you learn today?" she asks her youngest daughter in stilted English. Donna, 10, shrugs and says nothing. "Did you learn this," she asks again, holding up Donna's science homework and pointing to a frog. Donna knows her mother cannot read or write English.

Cha escaped communist Laos nearly 12 years ago. As a female in a tribe of farmers, she was never allowed to attend school. None of her ancestors could read or write, she says, but they all knew stories.

"Do you know the story of Cinderella?" Cha asks in Hmong and begins her rendition of the family tale of a lonely girl and the cruelty of her wicked stepmother. "The new stepmother decides there is not enough food for the family," Cha says in her native, lilting Hmong. "She sends Cinderella away . . ." The story continues as Cha holds her grandson and babysits other children. In her version of the story, the moral is that good parents should be treasured.

"I cannot read to them," she says, eyeing her 10-year-old's homework. "But when I am telling them these stories, I know they are getting a piece of me. In a way, I am not reading to them, they are reading me."

Hoa Ngo, like many other southeast Asian immigrant mothers, does not know about language crossover. Although her Vietnamese is flawless, her English is stilted, at best. Nevertheless, she stumbles through nearly two hours of reading and writing exercises everyday with her oldest daughter, seven-year-old Thona Thin. On an overcast January Sunday when most kids were watching Looney Tunes or MTV, Thona and her mother were studying consonants and sounding out letters. Ngo, an interior decorator, only completed two years of high school in Vietnam before immigrating in 1982. She has taken several English language classes and makes it a point to pick up her daughter after school everyday. She can read and write in Vietnamese, but she spends little time teaching her children their native language, preferring to concentrate on English.

"I feel sure that if I make her learn to read and write, she will be successful," Ngo explains confidently. In order to fuel that success, Ngo and her husband, a postal worker, take their children to many educational outings. Twice a month, the children visit the zoo, science center or art museum. "Some of the kids here, just finish high school and go to work. In our culture, in our family we stress higher education, we want to give our kids a good education so that they can do whatever they want when they grow up," she says.

Unlike other Southeast Asian communities, the Vietnamese generally tend to stay to themselves. Social responsibility for the upbringing of a child is confined to the parent. Because she wants her children to become Americanized and she knows the personal agony of learning two languages, she insists that her children speak English at home and at school.

"They live in America now," she says, gesturing outside to a carefully manicured middle-class front lawn and driveway. "They have to learn here."

A part of "learning here" for her children means giving up what is Vietnamese. Just as she and her husband gave up their homeland for the United States, she is willing to trade English literacy for Vietnamese illiteracy.

Sitting in a corner with Kim, Ngo's one-year-old daughter, her 65-year-old mother shakes her head. "How will I talk to this little one if she only speaks and writes English?" she queries Ngo. "Any language," she says, "there is good and bad."

Two Languages, Less Confusion

Ironically, educators like Alma Flor Ada at the University of San Francisco say that one of the greatest

roadblocks to literacy for second-generation Asian children can be the attitudes of their parents. All parents want the best for their children, but many fear that learning their native language—and gaining proficent literacy skills in it—may only "confuse" the child.

The fear is reinforced in immigrant families when children are born here. Those infants who are spoken to in both English and the family's native tongue are often slow to speak themselves. Ada says such children often will not utter their first words until age three—and this terrifies parents who think they are handicapping their child by a confusing onslaught of language. In fact, Ada says, the child is internalizing the structure of language. When words do come, they come in both languages simultaneously. "You aren't confusing the child," she says, "you're making them more intelligent."

This is an issue Portland parents like Cha and Ngo have discussed extensively at bi-weekly native language parent support groups. Parents often turn to English-as-a-Second-Language instructors, like Vang Chai, for guidance. "There is no question about which language Asian immigrant parents want their children to speak, read and write fluently," he says. "It's only a matter of degree. A lot of parents want English as a first language."

Parents are convinced that if their children learn English, their home language will remain, he says. Frequently, they think of their own problems in learning English as an adult and want to spare their child the ordeal of learning to read and write in a second tongue. That ordeal usually involves being cast as an outsider and being the target of racism.

"It was hard for me," says Kazia, Cha's 16-year-old daughter. "I wanted to read and write English but the kids at school would make fun of me for taking ESL classes and made me feel ashamed for being Hmong."

She coped with racism by refusing to speak Hmong at home and refusing to read English at school.

Today, Kazia's Hmong speaking abilities are far below her 12-year old sister's, and her English speaking and reading abilities are even worse. By not maintaining her cognitive growth in her home language, she may have stunted her literacy skills in English. Because Kazia has minimal literacy coping skills and very little proficiency in either language, she is regarded as semilingual. By suppressing speaking, reading and writing skills in both languages, she may be considered semiliterate.

In contrast, her 10-year-old sister, Donna, can read and write equally well in both languages. She is considered bi-literate and bilingual.

Cha feels personally responsible for the differences in her children's literacy skills. Because she has little money, she has never been able to take her children to plays, musical recitals and museums. "I don't know how to help them learn because I haven't taken classes and I can't teach them myself; all I can do is push," she says.

Pushing means calling her children's teachers weekly and asking about homework and progress. Pushing means two hours of study time every night while she sits nearby and sews. Pushing means being a vocal participant in the Hmong Parents Group. Education, she knows, is crucial. "For myself, I cannot read or write," she says. "But for the future of my children, I want the cycle of illiteracy to end with me."

Cha is hardly alone. Informal studies show that the illiteracy of an immigrant parent does not necessarily pass on to their children. In fact, almost 80% of second-generation Hmong immigrants in the Pacific Northwest are as literate as their classmates, Vang says.

"No matter how spread out we are in a city," he says, "we try to help each other. Many Hmong families are headed by single mothers because most husbands were detained or executed by the communists. We try to stay in a group." A close-knit community means that the education of a child becomes the responsibility of the entire community. Responsibility encompasses academic achievement and skills like literacy.

New View—Literacy as Active

A century ago, literacy was the ability to mark an X in a legal documents, more recently it was considered the ability to read and write after completing six years of school. As the demands of functioning in a society have grown in an information society, the definition of literacy has changed.

The 1991 National Literacy Act redefined literacy again. It says literacy is "an individual's ability to read, write and speak in English, and compute and solve problems at levels of proficiency necessary to function on the job and in society, to achieve one's goals, and develop one's knowledge and potential."

"That is significant because it recognizes for the first time that you have to be able to use those skills," says Cindy Stradel, Literacy Coordinator for the Literacy Line, a statewide referral network that links potential students with free basic skills programs, including reading, writing and language tutoring programs.

"For the first time, the definition of literacy identifies self-development, as well as economic and social goals as a motivation for learning," she notes.

Last April, the state of Oregon released the results from the first state adult literacy test in the nation. The study showed that nearly all adult Oregonians can read simple texts and read and answer simple math problems. But as the tasks became harder, like reading a bus schedule, their skills faltered.

What the literacy tests failed to measure was the level of comprehension among Oregonians who speak English as a second language. The results seem to be almost irrelevant to a city where the population increased 17.4% between 1979 and 1989, primarily from the influx of Southeast Asians and other non-English speaking immigrants.

In the Portland Public School District, 2,810 out of 53,533 students were identified as limited English proficient this school year. Of those, nearly 55% of the students are Asian and most are Vietnamese.

When Thona Thin started school last year, Ngo enrolled her in Portland's newcomer program called Project General Orientation and Assessment and Literacy. The newcomer project helps students in elementary school who are new to the country or the school district by providing English language skills. The program also teaches basic survival skills about rules and expectations of American schools.

Since 1986, nearly 750 students have gone through the program, the majority of Asian descent. The average number of years of prior school experience showed that most limited-English-proficiency students were place in two grade levels higher. For instance, most fifth grade LEP students had almost finished third grade in their homeland. Last school year, none of the 195 students had studied English prior to entering the program.

Strong Home Language Is Key

That is why it is pivotal for Southeast Asian students to have strong home language abilities, says Sally Anderson, project coordinator. "The stronger your skills are in your first language, the easier it is to transfer those skills into a second language," she says. "It's so hard because their whole frame of reference is in the their first language." Educators recognize that when a child is successful in the native language, he or she will approach the second with an expectation of success.

When parents like Cha cannot read or write in any language, the program takes over by building and reinforcing native language literacy skills for one hour everyday. Native language instructors teach everything from school routines to a lesson about the weather in the home language of the child.

"It helped out a lot that the teacher wasn't American, she would go through the steps with me," says Cher, Cha's 12-year-old daughter. "I didn't feel so alone."

A Different Literacy

In telling stories, the illiterate immigrant Blia Thao Cha in Portland, Ore., is also setting her children on the path to literacy, says Alma Flor Ada, a multicultural language expert at the University of San Francisco. How do you teach children to read and write in a foreign language—English—when they cannot read and write in their native tongue? That is a question that immigrant parents have had to deal with in Portland and nationwide. Ada says there is a skill to being literate, and even illiterate parents can begin teaching it by telling stories in the child's first language. Children learn the structure of stories and literacy skills through oral traditions, she explains. Learning the structure means learning cognitive, ordering skills. For instance, when a child is read to at night, she or he learns that stories have a beginning, a middle and an end, and uses that knowledge when it comes time to read.

Illiterate parents, like Cha, provide their children with the same knowledge by passing on Portland educators say that a strong home traditional tales orally. Children of parents who cannot read learn the structure of writing. Cha's version of Cinderella and more traditional Hmong tales exposes her children to the craft of storytelling, just as would reading the fable from a book. "Not only are children learning the language, but learning the context," Ada says. "There's a lot of crossover from language to language."

Portland educators say that a strong home language program is necessary for literacy. Not only does it build the framework for learning English quicker, it insures respect for the child's homeland and culture, as well as shows support for the families.

"Children develop cognitive flexibility when they learn two languages, they develop a certain ability to do better with newer tasks," Ada says. "The danger for our kids is not to learn English, but not to learn the mother tongue."

Ada met with teachers and groups of parents in early February to recommend that they work together on developing literacy skills in children. She encouraged parents to talk with their child everyday about specific school activities, discuss homework and special assignments, but most of all, to continue to maintain the home language through storytelling.

Ada also stressed that as parents, their responsibilities did not end with trying to teach their children at home. She said they needed to make their concerns known to teachers and especially to school board members. After all, she said, they control how much money would be spent in teaching bilingual children. Ada adds privately that she believed school districts should mandate bilingual education for students who learn English as a second language. In Portland, it is offered as an option.

Parents, she says, were willing to go along with programs mandated by schools—like requiring their children to study algebra and physics—but were hesitant to "do the right thing" when faced with a choice.

"Some colleagues and parents feel learning the skills for academic success are jeopardized by learning the language," Ada says. "It's a false dichotomy, when we think it's either/or rather than thinking it's additive."

Additive literacy or lingualism is defined as a child's ability to be literate in two languages. Basically, the child maintains the home language and acquires another—a feat made possible only with the cooperation of the parent and the school. Subtractive lingualism is when a child abandons the home language for the second language. Semi-lingual children are not proficient in either language.

Although Ngo's daughter gets As and Bs in school, she recognizes the distinct possibility that Thona Thin's English proficiency and Vietnamese illiteracy may hinder their ability to communicate with each other in the future.

"I try to keep up with her English by taking classes," she confides, "but I know that someday, she'll be much better them me."

Because her two youngest children are learning English quickly from their sister, Thona Thin, and are only speaking English at home, Ngo realizes her children are losing their native language.

"My parents are disappointed that my kids don't speak as much Vietnamese, They want the old traditions again and are surprised when the kids here grow up and are different from my country," she says.

But, like many Southeast Asian parents, Cha and Ngo define success in American terms.

"If you're looking for a job, you have to have a school certificate," says Cha.

"If you don't have a good education, you won't get a job," Ngo echoes.

Tips for Reporters

Set a clear focus on what you are after before you begin your interviews. And make sure that both you and the person you are interviewing understand the difference between terms like "literacy" and "lingual." Getting the terminology straight will be especially critical when trying to get statistical information from state agencies.

Do not be intimidated by the language barrier. As schools make a greater effort to serve immigrant populations, the importance of finding a source of good translators will become crucial. The alternative is to rely on press spokespersons and English-speaking sources, rather than getting the views of the people most effected.

In Portland, Ore., which has a large Asian population, Asian language-speaking churches are a good resource to call upon, as are schools and even the courts, which have lists of individuals who are available to translate a variety of languages. Your local International Refugee Center may also be a good source to call upon. I found that translators were comparatively inexpensive to use—$20 to $40 an hour. Such a rate in a metropolitan area would be well within the means of most daily newspapers.

Don't rush your project. In addition to the extra time it will take to conduct interviews through translators, the subjects of your interviews may appear to be unreliable in being available for appointments. This often is for cultural differences and your interview subjects may view hurried conversations for the purposes of meeting deadlines as a social slight. You may also have difficulty in scheduling a time when you, your interview subject and your interpreter are available. The story of these families and their desire to gain the best education possible for their children is an important one for education writers. But it probably is not one that can be rushed into in order to meet, say, a deadline for next Sunday's paper.

Also, try to abide by social etiquette of each culture. For example, when interviewing the Hmong family, I brought a gift of fresh fruit for the children. If you are not aware of the social norms of the culture, perhaps the interpreter can help you.

Be cautious about letting preconceived notions about different ethnic cultures color your understanding of the issues involved in bilingual education. Be aware that many of the attitudes expressed from

barstools throughout middle America may be echoed by immigrant parents. This does not necessarily make them right, though. Rednecks and parents may both think immigrant children should "learn to speak the language" and abandon the language of their parents. But ignorance has always had a certain amount of popular appeal. I found it helpful to express any assumptions I had about the subject with experts and educators, and found that common attitudes are not always valid.

Be prepared for officials who are not well-versed in the subject of intergenerational literacy and not willing to admit it. Turn to government agencies like school boards and state departments of education for help, but don't forget volunteer groups. In Oregon, agencies like The Literacy Line—which links struggling or at-risk students with volunteers who will tutor in basic skills like reading, writing and mathematics—are a great source of information.

There are a great many academic studies about the general subject of literacy, but surprisingly, there seem to be few experts in the field of intergenerational literacy specific to minority groups and even fewer who make themselves available to speak to reporters.

SOURCES AND MATERIALS

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ABOUT THE EDUCATION WRITERS ASSOCIATION

The Education Writers Association (EWA), is the national professional association of education reporters. It was organized in July, 1947 by a group of education reporters covering the annual convention of a national education association in Cincinnati, Ohio. An editorial appearing in The Cincinnati Enquirer at the time said, "The newspapermen and women who are organizing the Education Writers Association feel that . . . the reporting of school news requires just as much specialized expertness as the reporting of political, sports or police news. . . . There is a definite place for an Education Writers Association, and we have nothing but wishes for success for the men and women who have brought about its organization."

The news of education is as important as ever and the Education Writers Association continues its work to improve education reporting to the general public. The organization has grown since 1947 to more than 600 members in most of the states, Canada and Puerto Rico. Active members include reporters from print and broadcast media. Associate members include writers and information officers for organizations, school districts, and colleges and universities.

The Education Writers Association conducts an annual national seminar and regional workshops where the education issues of the day are discussed. It also sponsors an annual awards competition for the best education writing, The National Awards for Education Reporting. EWA publishes several newsletters and special reports, including *Wolves at the Schoolhouse Door*—an investigation of public school buildings.

This report was produced with funds the John D. and Catherine T. MacArthur Foundation. Other reports in this series include: *Is the Story Literacy, Decent Jobs or Political Will?*, a report examining the effectiveness of programs to educate and train welfare recipients and programs for workplace literacy; and *BackBeats*, a compilation of EWA's newsletter on literacy issues. Related work on the school-to-work transition includes: *First Jobs* (a look at the school to work transition in the U.S.), and *Training for Work: What the U.S. Can Learn From Europe*.